

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

NOVELETTE

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Perhaps it is true, after all, that the steady, colorless people are not as orderly as one might presume.



I had been going over the Spencer books, when I glanced down at the wastebasket beside my desk. At its bottom, on top of the crumpled wastepaper, lay a head, eyes half-open, staring up at me.

I forced my eyes back to my desk.

As surreptitiously as I could, I scanned the office. It was a large,

chiefly unpartitioned room, containing some twenty desks. Everyone seemed busy enough. Nobody appeared to be watching me.

I added a column of figures slowly.

Were all of them in on it? Were they all waiting for my reaction—or just Hager?

Even though I had not finished adding the column, I turned the page, giving me the opportunity to raise my eyes again.

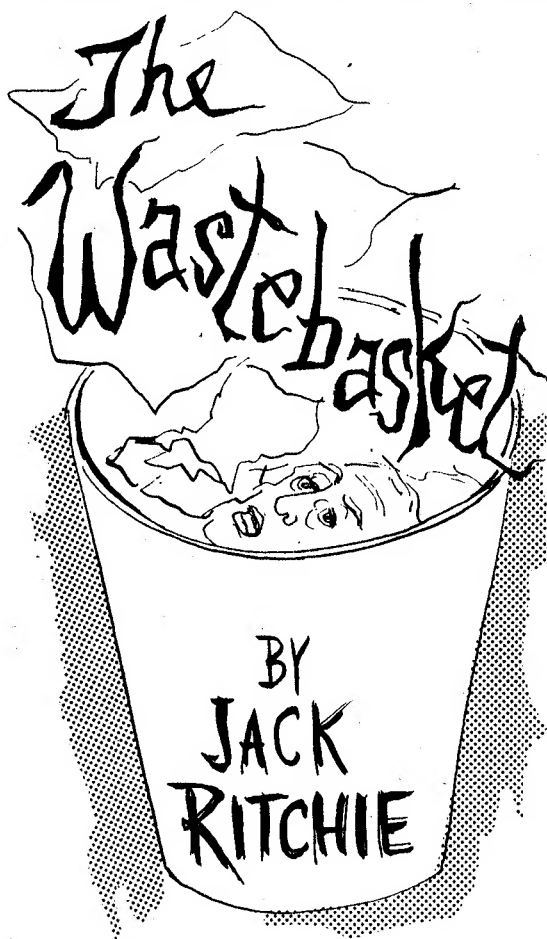
Hager sat at his desk, apparently going over bills of lading—or pretending to?

What did he expect of me? That I would scream and faint when I saw the head in my wastebasket?

Yes, probably; it had been that way last week when I opened my desk drawer and had seen the severed arm.

The arm had been wax, of course; a clever wax model of a severed arm.

Hager had come to the firm some three months ago and that had been the beginning of an epidemic of “practical” jokes—the



buzzer in the palm, the squirting flower, the exploding cigar.

It was several weeks before he turned to me as one of his victims. Perhaps he overlooked me at first because I am generally characterized as colorless. I do my work quietly and leave at the end of the day.

I am in my early fifties and have been employed by Black & Black for some thirty years, never missing a day, except to attend my father's funeral.

I carefully studied the wastebasket again. Yes, certainly a wax head; frankly not very realistic at all—no color in the cheeks. Still, perhaps that was the way it was supposed to look—drained of blood.

The head appeared strangely familiar but it took me a few more moments to recognize it. Of course; it was supposed to represent the head of Bronson, the janitor. Not a very good likeness though; the face was too thin, the hair too coarse.

Now, just what *should* I do about this? Ignore the head all day? Throw my wastepaper on top of it and pretend that I had simply never noticed it at all?

I found myself smiling as I imagined Bronson emptying the office wastebaskets at the end of the day and seeing his own head

tumbling out of one of them.

Or should I now just calmly get to my feet and empty the wastebasket on Hager's desk, saying something like, "I believe this head belongs to you?"

Yes, that would be most satisfactory. Unfortunately, I couldn't do it. It was a little too exhibitionistic for my nature.

My eyes went to the head again. Yes, it was quite artificial. Even those drops of blood on the wastepaper were obvious fakes—brown, instead of red.

I felt vaguely uneasy.

Did genuine blood turn brown after exposure to the air?

My hands were a bit damp.

Of course it was ridiculous, utterly ridiculous, but suppose that were a *real* head in the wastebasket? Wouldn't a human head be somewhat drained of blood and probably appear waxen?

Yet it was absolutely insane to think that anyone would actually put a human head into my wastebasket. How could Hager possibly have managed it? He couldn't just walk across a crowded office carrying a dripping head.

Suppose he had let it drain first? Suppose he had put it into a paper bag or some other container? Suppose he had deposited the head in my wastebasket before eight o'clock this morning when

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no one was about in the office?

If this were, indeed, a human head, then it was no longer just a practical joke. This was murder!

I wiped my forehead with a handkerchief.

Why would anyone want to murder the janitor? Why go through the ritual of severing his head and placing it in my wastebasket?

The answer seemed painfully obvious.

If Bronson's head were found in my wastebasket, everyone—including certainly the police—would immediately jump to the conclusion that I had killed Bronson. My fingerprints would almost surely be on the very crumpled paper upon which the head rested.

What possible motive could I have for such a crime, though? I did not even remember ever talking to Bronson in my life. Perhaps I had nodded to him in passing, but that was all.

I became aware of the office boy routinely going from desk to desk picking up the early morning outgoing mail. He would be here in a few moments.

I almost panicked, but then I saw my briefcase leaning against my desk. Quickly I put it on top of the wastebasket.

The office boy came whistling

to my desk, removed the three letters in my outbox, and moved on.

I took a deep breath.

This was all insane. The head *had* to be wax. All I had to do was just reach into the wastebasket and touch . . .

But suppose it wasn't wax? Suppose it was really the janitor's head?

I went to the water cooler and swallowed two aspirin.

How could the police possibly believe that I could murder Bronson? I certainly had no motive—but did a crime like this *need* a motive?

It was one thing to kill Bronson, but quite another to cut off his head and deposit it in a wastebasket. It was the work of a madman and madmen do not need motives.

I grimly imagined the speculation of the state psychiatrists and psychologists. The very steadiness and order that were my strength and stability would now be regarded as suppressions.

I led a quiet life. I had no hobbies, no close friends. I had never married and I lived with two spinster sisters and a widowed mother.

I cut the grass regularly. I rose at the same time every morning and went to bed at the same time

every evening. I did not drink. I did not smoke. I had never been absent from work a single day, except for that funeral.

Would they make something out of that, too?

Whether the head was wax or not, I would have to get rid of it immediately—but how? Should I simply pick up the wastebasket and walk out of here?

No. If it were a real head, would the murderer allow me to dispose of it so easily? After all, he had gone through the trouble of planting it in my wastebasket.

Would he “accidentally” jostle me and knock the basket from my hands as I passed, causing the head to tumble to the floor over and over?

I would need a box. That was it. When I was positive that no one watched me, I would quickly empty my wastebasket into the box. I would walk out of the office with the box under my arm, apparently taking it to the mail room for wrapping, but I would drop it down the chute to the incinerator instead.

There must be some suitable boxes in the firm’s storeroom.

I let myself into the corridor and followed it to the door at the

far end. I opened it and stepped inside. The storeroom seemed shaded and rather quiet. Evidently no one was here at the moment.

I moved toward a table of apparently empty boxes at the farthest end of the room. I stopped. I saw the black shoes, the dark-gray uniform trousers, the . . .

The body had no head—and beside it lay a large bloody knife.

I heard footsteps in the corridor and saw the silhouette against the opaque glass. The knob turned and the door opened. It was Reilly, the office manager. He closed the door behind him.

At my desk, I frowned. What had I been doing last? These damn headaches played hob with my memory.

Miss Grinnel came to me with some papers.

She glanced down into my wastebasket and saw the two heads, side by side—the head of Bronson and the head of Reilly.

Her eyes widened.

I sighed. Why must they always try to scream?

I reached into the bottom drawer of my desk for the knife and used it for the third time that morning.

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